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Wood, Thomas Denison

War's emphasis on health education

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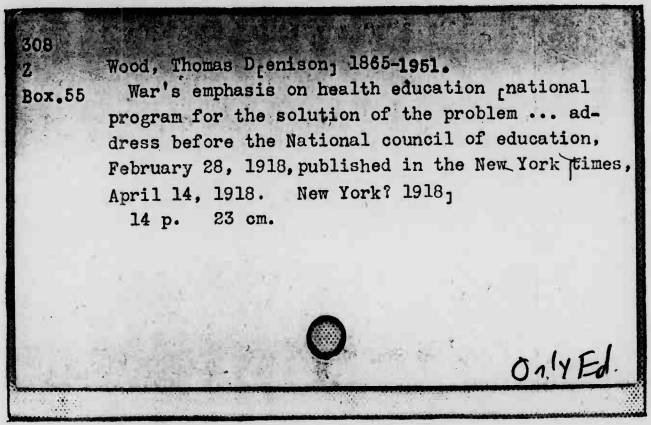
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War's Emphasis on Health Education

National Program for the Solution of the Problem

THOMAS D. WOOD, M.D.

Teachers College, Columbia University
Chairman of Committee on Health Problems of the National Council of Education

Address before the
National Council of Education, February 28, 1918
published in the *New York Times*, April 14, 1918

War's Emphasis on Health Education

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A National Program of Health Education

NATIONS are striving today, as never before, for the essentials of existence; the conditions of perpetuity; the foundations of prosperity. War throws a spotlight of convincing clearness upon national defects. The youthful confidence and complacency of our overgrown republic are shaken to the depths regarding the elements, the sources of national soundness and vigor. We are beginning to suspect, if not to fully realize, that even more essential and fundamental to the integrity and permanence of a nation than scientific progress, political achievement, industrial development, and economic accomplishment, are biologic soundness and fitness, the health of the people.

This national asset, health, while the most essential, is at the present time the most endangered of all our natural resources. We are appalled at the number of our young men, in both voluntary and draft enlistment, who are incapable of defending their country; who are rejected for military service because of physical and mental defects.

While types of disease and weakness are markedly different in their prevalence in, and effects upon the sexes, still the welfare of the nation is, on the whole, as seriously threatened by the health limitations of girls and women as by those of boys and men.

Some there are who, in view of recent revelations, apprehend this menace to the welfare of the nation. And yet it has been known for years before this great war engulfed us, that seventy-five per cent. of the more than 20,000,000

school children of this country were handicapped by physical defects. While some of the defects, which are incapacitating our young men for military efficiency and which are lowering the ability of our citizens for the business of life, develop in late adolescence or adult life, still many of them exist in the children and youth in our schools.

In the mobilization of our nation's resources for the stupendous task of this war, nothing is more dramatic or impressive than the inspiring spectacle of these young men being trained to preparedness for the intensive, the grim business of war. Records even of men in our great training camps, who have been accepted as fit for military service, show that in multitudes of cases, and within six months after the beginning of training, the improvement in health, in vitality, in physical and general efficiency has been almost incredible. Shall we not provide as thorough and effective health care and physical education for the children of our country as we furnish for the young men in the army and navy?

Lives are being needlessly sacrificed; human power in enormous quantity is left wholly or partially undeveloped; economic loss of staggering extent occurs, because scientific knowledge and practical wisdom are not applied to the prevention of needless weakness and disease, and for the constructive development of the potential health resources of the children of our great country.

The monstrous efficiency of the German Empire in this awful war is due in an important part to the organized health work, the national program of health care and education which has been conducted in that country for the last half century.

The pioneer development in school hygiene occurred in Germany. The movement for open-air schools began in Germany. Many of the best examples of experiment and accomplishment in the field of health education have

occurred in the very country which today hurls fearful menace at the safety and freedom of the civilized world. We must learn, even from the fiendish success of despotic Germany, important lessons for the solution of vital problems which perplex democracy.

Hundreds of millions are being expended for hospitals, for supplies, for medical care of the soldiers in training; for our men who are wounded or in any way disabled in the service of the country; and the best that can be done in all of this program is never really enough. Institutions are being prepared for the convalescence of our splendid men who are shattered in hazardous service for all the rest of us. Wonderful and unprecedented plans are being made for the fullest possible reconstruction and rehabilitation of those who are injured in war. Plans are being most wisely made, under the revised requirements of the draft, for the removal and correction of the remediable physical defects of the men who are found to be below the standard of physical fitness. And all of this is as it should be. Too much cannot be done.

But what about the basic needs of the great draft army of the nation's children who must supply the human units of the citizenry of the next generation; who must bear the burden of civilization in peace and in war? What shall we do about the neglect of the children who hold the future of civilization in their immature lives?

Our country is suffering—not only in relation to the war, but in the general program of the nation's advancement—annual economic loss amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars, and human loss of value immeasurable; because the health, the biologic soundness and welfare of the children are so largely neglected; because existing defects are not recognized and cured whenever possible; because the available forces are not mobilized to prevent diseases which might be avoided with intelligent and organ-

ized effort; because wisdom is not practically applied to the conservation and development of the most vital of all our nation's resources, the health of the people, and, most important of all, the health of the children and youth. For, let it be said again, the foundations for enduring soundness of the nation must be laid in provisions secured for the health and welfare of the children.

Our schools are wasting enormous sums in educating, or trying to educate, the children who are handicapped by ill-health when the expenditure of much smaller amounts in a judicious health program would produce an extraordinary saving in economy and efficiency. A dollar spent promptly in a timely, constructive effort to conserve a child's health will be more fruitful for the child and for human society than will a thousand dollars applied twenty years later. The principle of national thrift finds its first and most vital application in the conservation and improvement of the health of the children.

At least one per cent.—200,000 of the 22,000,000 school children in the United States, are mentally defective.

Over one per cent.—250,000 at least, of the children are handicapped by organic heart disease.

At least five per cent.—1,000,000 children have now, or have had tuberculosis, a danger often to others as well as to themselves.

Five per cent.—1,000,000 of them have defective hearing, which unrecognized, gives many the undeserved reputation of being mentally defective.

Twenty-five per cent.—5,000,000 of these school children, have defective eyes. All but a small percentage of these can be corrected, and yet a majority of them have received no attention.

Fifteen to twenty-five per cent.—3,000,000 to 5,000,000 of them are suffering from malnutrition, and poverty is

not the most important cause of this serious barrier to healthy development.

From fifteen to twenty-five per cent.—3,000,000 to 5,000,000 have adenoids, diseased tonsils, or other glandular defects.

From ten to twenty per cent.—2,000,000 to 4,000,000 have weak foot-arches, weak spines, or other joint defects.

From fifty to seventy-five per cent.—11,000,000 to 16,000,000 of our school children have defective teeth, and all defective teeth are more or less injurious to health. Some of these defective teeth are deadly menaces to their owners.

Seventy-five per cent.—16,000,000 of the school children of the United States have physical defects which are potentially or actually detrimental to health. Most of these defects are remediable.

One of the appalling revelations of recent years is the conclusion based on unrefuted evidence that the rural school children in this country are handicapped by more physical defects than the pupils in the city schools. While several significant causes seem to be responsible for this astounding condition, the present physical inferiority of country children depends in part upon the fact that city children now receive more health care than do those in rural regions.

Is it necessary to urge that in *all* of the school children of the country these health defects should be recognized, and that *all* of the defects which demand remediable attention should be promptly corrected? It is lamentably true that in only a small percentage of the entire school population are the defects studied and recognized, while in only a small fraction of these even, are the detrimental defects corrected in an effective manner.

The business of keeping the school children of this country in good physical repair is, as now conducted, a

disgrace to the nation. The great majority of people (many of them generally intelligent) fail to appreciate the significance of these defects. This fact, however, does not lessen in any way the injury to the children of the neglected health defects.

The real danger to the children of the land, as a matter of fact, lies in the ignorance, irresponsibility of, and neglect by, the adults intrusted with, and supposed to be equal to the most important task of the adults of any species: namely, the care and training of the young.

The children of our country deserve as effective physical care as the live stock.

The children are entitled, even in war times, to as careful attention and cultivation as the crops.

Shall not the children, drafted by compulsory education into our schools, be assured of as skillful and satisfactory care as the soldiers in camp and trench?

If health and physical efficiency are then, so important for the country as a whole, all of the necessary forces, both governmental and voluntary, must be marshalled for the task of protecting and developing the physical fitness of the young.

The principle of universal training must, in a manner consonant with the spirit and methods of democracy, be interpreted and applied in the universal, compulsory health and physical care, and training of all the children of the nation. Moreover, a comprehensive program of health training must provide for the education of adults as well as of the children. The children will be the responsible adults of the next generation, but those now of adult age control largely the opportunities of the young in preparation for adult life.

While it is true that many agencies of influence and responsibility are requisite for a comprehensive national health program, still it is equally true that the consideration of any particular phase of this work must recognize the importance of cooperation with other agencies as clearly as the details of its own work.

In a nation with compulsory education and free schools, the possibilities of a health education program are extraordinarily impressive. The acceptance of the rapidly widening social scope of education, in preparing the young for all the privileges and responsibilities of life, carries inevitably with it the opportunity and obligation that the school shall undertake the most important part in the entire continuous program of health education.

Much of the actual health care of the children must be accomplished by the home, by health boards, and by other organizations, both governmental and voluntary. However, the school in the United States is the universal, the officially credited, and the strategic agency to lead in the educational program of health, to standardize the principles involved, and to organize and supervise the social program for the care of the children's health.

A national program of health education, adequate in any way to the essential needs of the situation, must include the following items:

I. Health examination, and supervision of the pupils' health, with provision for the following phases:

A. Daily inspection of pupils, and regulation of attendance at school for the prevention and control of acute and contagious diseases. The children are compelled to attend school at an age when they are peculiarly susceptible to many forms of acute disease and physical defect. The school is, in its very nature, perfectly adapted to serve as an agency for assembling and distributing children's diseases throughout the community, and all too frequently this is just what occurs. The best knowledge and skill of preventive medicine and the efficient service and cooperation of all available forces—physicians, nurses, teachers,

school officials, parents, and even the children themselves are requisite for a reasonable minimizing of these diseases of child life. Every school vitally needs an efficient form of health supervision with medical direction; with the strikingly effective services of properly qualified school nurses; with the essential cooperation of well-trained teachers and of parents willing to do their share in promoting the welfare of all the children.

The methods of controlling and preventing communicable diseases among school children will not be satisfactory until parents and guardians keep away from the school not only the children with "*symptoms* of recognized (diagnosed) disease," but the children with "*signs* of health disturbance."

B. Provision for the general health of the pupils should include the following:

1. Health examination and dental inspection, at least once a year, followed by notification and advice to the homes.
2. Follow-up health service by school and district nurses, with cooperation of home and all available organizations.
3. Provision for correction of all harmful, remediable defects by medical and surgical care, and by dental and health clinics. Children handicapped by health defects cannot make the best use of the education offered to, or forced upon, them. Education which pretends to help prepare the children for life cannot logically neglect any element of vital concern in their development.
4. Warm school lunches for all pupils who do not eat warm lunches at home.

   Society should not pauperize any home or child, but society for its own welfare should prevent by every possible means malnutrition in growing children. The warm lunch is necessary to the health of every child. The school lunch, as an illustration of principles of nutrition and as an object lesson, is the most effective means of educating the school child, the home, and the community in better ways of selecting and using foods.

II. A healthful school environment.

The schoolhouse and surroundings should be sanitary and attractive. They should be healthful not only when built but also in their maintenance and use. A model school fallen into neglect may be far less salutary in health influence than a cheap, makeshift building well cared for. The schoolhouse should be as sanitary and healthful in all essential particulars as the best home in the community. Further, it should be pleasing and attractive in appearance, in furnishings, and in surroundings, so that the community as a whole may be proud of it; so that the pupils and teachers may receive pleasure in attending school and in caring for and improving it. Healthful and attractive schools are absolutely essential to the physical, mental, social, economic, and moral well-being of the children and teachers, and to the life and welfare of the Nation as a whole. Such schools are powerful health agencies, serving as examples of sanitation to all who see them, and affecting healthfully pupils and teachers and all others who come within their influence.

III. A hygienic school management which insures conditions in the highest attainable degree favorable and healthful; in methods and materials of instruction; arrangements of program; length of school day; forms of examinations and tests; methods of grading and promotion; arrangement and supervision of recesses; requirements of home study; and in personality and influence of teachers.

IV. Effective health training and teaching of pupils, which is dependent upon:

A. Inculcation of health habits affecting the pupil individually and in relation to the home, school, community, and the State.

B. Instruction in facts, principles, and motives which will provide the best basis for intelligent and effective action.

C. Greater emphasis upon health than upon disease in the program of health teaching.

D. Greater emphasis upon social than upon personal or individual aspects of hygiene.

E. Education of children for responsible parenthood —dependent in part upon two factors:

1. That the teachers should be more comprehensively and thoroughly trained to understand all aspects in the lives of the developing children under their care.
2. That parents should be better prepared for their own part in the education and guidance of their own children.

V. Provision of an adequate and rational physical education, with:

A. Well-equipped playgrounds, athletic fields, gymnasiums, and utilization of all available outdoor facilities.

B. Employment of teachers and supervisors qualified to give sensible and satisfactory guidance to the physical training activities.

C. The acceptance of useful and healthful industrial, vocational and social service activities in the physical training program.

VI. Better preparation of teachers for health education.

If advantage is to be taken of the opportunities offered, and if the responsibilities for health service are to be adequately met, the teacher must be thoroughly trained and equipped for the task. It is important that the teacher should be healthy—a helpful and inspiring example in this whole field of health influence—and intelligent and wise with reference to the wide program of education.

The following factors of improvement seem advisable in relation to this problem:

A. The teachers should be more carefully selected, partly with reference to health qualifications, and they should be more adequately trained, so that they may direct their own lives more efficiently and through their better knowledge of health laws fulfill more satisfactorily their obligations in the schools and in relation to their pupils, and to the communities in which they work.

B. Society should provide more favorable conditions for the preservation of the teacher's health, and for the improved efficiency of the teacher's work.

The argument, then, for a national program of health education finds rational support in the present stage of social and educational development in the United States, and convincing emphasis for this proposal is projected from the present world crisis and from the lessons to be derived by our democracy from this struggle of civilization.

To provide the essentials of administration for A National Program of Health Education the following propositions are submitted:

I. That a comprehensive, thorough-going program of health education and physical education is absolutely needed for all boys and girls, of elementary and secondary school age, both rural and urban, in every state in the Union.

II. That legislation, similar in purpose and scope to the provisions and requirements in the laws recently enacted in California, New York State and New Jersey, is desirable in every state, to provide authorization and support for statewide programs in the health and physical education field.

III. That the United States Bureau of Education should be empowered by law, and provided with sufficient appropriations, to exert adequate influence and supervision in relation

to a nation-wide program of instruction in health and physical education.

IV. That it seems most desirable that Congress should give recognition to this vital and neglected phase of education, with a bill and appropriation similar in purpose and scope to the Smith-Hughes law; to give sanction, leadership, and support to a national program of health and physical education; and to encourage, standardize, and, in part, finance the practical program of constructive work that should be undertaken in every state.

V. That federal recognition, supervision, and support are urgently needed, as the effective means, under the constitution, to secure that universal training of boys and girls in health and physical fitness which are equally essential to efficiency of all citizens both in peace and in war.

The possibilities of vital accomplishment in a national program of health education seem not only fundamental for national safety, but limitless for national progress. The significance and necessity of the work to be done makes the demand for constructive advancement imperative. No factor relating to essentials in public education or promotion of national welfare seems more important or more promising.

A French war correspondent said recently: "I wish you knew our French Lieutenant. He is one of the finest men I ever hope to know. He makes you feel that even more than the great cathedrals he should be guarded and protected—for France." And so I say to you—I wish you appreciated the children and youth of this republic. They make up, in possibilities, the finest generation of human beings the world has ever seen. They make you feel that; even more than the great museums and monuments; more than great industrial plants and ships; more than great skyscrapers and cathedrals; they should be guarded and protected, cultivated and developed, for America—for the World.

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